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Ephesians: The Sealing of the Spirit

Ephesians 1:11-14

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BACK TO MAIN SERMON PAGE

Several weeks ago, I shared with you the story of the pursuit of the white rabbit. The point of that story was that we will tend to drop out of the race for holiness if we only follow others who have experienced holiness - if we are only caught up in the enthusiasm of others, we will fail to be constant in *our* search. This morning's passage from Ephesians touches on this theme again. What I want you to hear is that if we are to experience God, we must be open to God, and to the differing ways God will speak to us. This kind of openness requires us to be free of any preconditions about how God will speak. If you insist that God speak to you just as he spoke to Moses, then you will be forever going to your back yard to see if one of your bushes is burning but not consumed. It would be better to think of the childhood puzzles in which you were to find the shape of a fish in the different places - perhaps hidden in the shape of stones, or in animals or clouds or people or trees or in the pattern of stones in the chimney or the water in a brook. This is what our search for God will be like - searching in the ordinary things of life.

This morning I want to double back and focus on a smaller section of the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Verses 11-14 continue the theme that God has graciously chosen us, that we are receivers of the same love the heavenly Father has for His Son, that this choosing and this awesome love lead to something tangible - an awareness that we are of enormous worth, AND that we are left with the desire to respond to this love, which we do in the context of doing ministry with one another and with the world.

When Paul says, in verse 11, that 'we were also chosen,' what he means is 'we Jews.' Paul, a Jew, is telling the Christians in Ephesus (both Jews and Gentiles but mostly Gentiles) that we Jews were the first to hope in Christ because God first revealed himself to Jews, and it was from the Jewish nation that the Messiah arose. The time between the creation of the world and the coming of Christ was not without revelation - Yahweh God was very active then, as he is today. Certainly those days were but preliminary. The secret now revealed was still 'hidden,' but the time between creation and Christ was nevertheless filled with covenants, indeed, by the promise of covenant renewal. Even before these days of the Christ, Paul says, God proved his love over and over again.

To take this a bit further, Paul is saying that if the choosing of Israel no longer mattered, (you) Gentiles might have reason to doubt whether your being chosen in Christ is solid, irrevocable, eternal. So Paul reminds them of the privilege granted to Israel and says that God not only gives a promise but keeps it. The faith of Gentiles is rooted in the faith first held by Jews.

Paul moves to remind the Gentiles that they heard the same word of truth which the Jews accepted, the good news (gospel) of salvation. Having believed, Paul reminds them that they were 'sealed' or 'marked with a seal.' And Paul associates this 'sealing' with the Holy Spirit.

As you will find all over the writings of Paul, the Holy Spirit plays a key role. By having given the Gentiles the Holy Spirit promised to Israel (the fulfillment of the prophecy to pour out the Spirit was accomplished on the Day of Pentecost), God 'sealed' the gentiles as his own possession. At the same time and by the same 'sealing,' God is also guaranteeing the final inheritance for both Jew and Gentile alike, since the Spirit is God's 'down payment' of *our* inheritance (Jew and Gentile together). Thus with a subtle shift of pronouns Paul moves from 'our' (= Jews) having obtained an inheritance, to 'your' (= Gentiles) having been sealed by the 'promised Holy Spirit (promised to the Jews, accomplished at Pentecost), TO the Spirit as God's down payment on 'our' (= Jews and Gentiles together) final inheritance.

The metaphor of *sealing* images ownership and authentication. By giving them his Holy Spirit, God stamped the Gentile recipients of this letter as 'his own possession,' marking them off as his inheritance to be realized at the final redemption. As before, there can be little question that the Spirit himself is the seal, the mark of ownership. Having the Holy Spirit inside is itself the seal, or the 'being sealed,' and we know from Romans, that the Holy Spirit enters us when we profess Jesus Christ as Lord.

So, one significant learning here is that it's the Spirit, not baptism, that is the 'seal' of ownership, the primary evidence that one belongs to a new people of God. We get baptized to make a public affirmation of our faith, but it's not the water baptism (however it's used) that marks the entrance into the Body of Christ - it's the presence (or absence) of the Holy Spirit.

And we're not talking about a subsequent anointing or 'baptism' of the Spirit in the idea of 'sealing,' but rather that entry of the Spirit into people at the point they become believers in Christ, or become born-again, or whatever phrase you like to use. Although I believe scripture teaches that there can be (and often is) a subsequent-to-conversion anointing of the Spirit, Ephesians 1 is not talking about that, but about the initial entrance of the Holy Spirit into those who confess Jesus as Lord.

The Spirit is the sine qua non (the essential 'ingredient') of Christian existence. The Spirit, and the Spirit alone, marks off the people of God as his own possession. Yet, in Paul and elsewhere in the New Testament, we always see sort of tension between the 'I already have it' and the 'I don't have it all.' This 'already … not yet' concept is part of what Paul is saying about the presence of the Holy Spirit in these verses - the down payment both gives payment in the present AND guarantees full or final payment in the future.

When we look at the present fulfillment, the 'already' side of the picture Paul paints for us, we see that the future has been set in motion. The 'sealing of the Spirit' <u>for both Jews and Gentiles</u> means that the believing community is enabled to do things they would not do of their own resources. In no particular order, we can now:

- **Participate in the praise of God's glory (1:6, 12, 14)**
- **Make known God's wisdom (3:10)**
- **Carry abroad the news of peace (6:15)**
- **Wield the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God (6:17)**

We are empowered by the Spirit to do these things. And we *become* an exhibition of God's love and power. Although we have a 'Mission Committee,' Paul is saying that *we become mission* - we, you and I, become the power of God directed to a hurting world.

What I want to say to you this morning is that this is what Paul is teaching us. This is a careful and even articulate exposition of what God's Word in Ephesians means. Paul is certainly writing to people who are like us, and they too have a choice. The Spirit is present in every born-again believer, prepared and ready to empower that believer to be used in absolutely mind-bending ways to further God's plan and glory. But that doesn't mean that every born-again believer wants to be a instrument of God.

Most of the works of the Holy Spirit go far beyond the enrichment or edification of individual persons. Most of the gifts of the Spirit have to do with the life of the community - the empowerment that can come to you isn't only for you, but for the community of faith (CPC) of which you are a part. You receive a gift and use it so that the body is enriched. You get a grace-infused gift and use it as the arm or leg or kneecap so that the body moves easily into ministry. But God doesn't force-feed. God doesn't break down your door. God doesn't badger with incessant pleas for obedience. God doesn't withhold favor until you comply. God doesn't send you to your room for a time-out if you don't jump up and volunteer.

What God does, is send me to you to say *these things*. God want you to want to be used. God has given you the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is present within you, ready to empower you to be used by God. You have got to want to be empowered. That's the way God set this up - he desires worship from his children but it's got to be their choice. We have to decide whether we will follow him today, this day.

Alcoholics and other members of 12 Step programs don't learn to say they will never drink (or use drugs or gamble or overeat, etc) again, but to say, at the beginning of each new day, '*Today* I will not feed this addiction." It's a daily regimen. A daily re-commitment to addiction free living. That's what I think Paul is saying to us, in a reverse manner. We all, Jews and Gentiles, have been given the Holy Spirit, an incredible down payment that gives life and power right now in addition to what we have to look forward to. Yet, this empowerment that comes to you, to me, needs to be embraced, accepted. The check has to be cashed. If we want God Almighty to work in us and flow through us, we have to reverse the daily commitment of the addicted and say, 'God, *today* I will let you live through me. *Today*, Holy Spirit, I will listen to your prompting. *Today* I will use the gifts you've given me for ministry, not for myself. *Today* I will partner with you in doing the work you have asked me to do, using your resources.'

As Paul says in verse 14, all of this will be 'to the praise of his glory.' Our being chosen, Jews joining together with Gentiles, the sealing of the Spirit, all of this leans into the wind of finding ways to be in ministry, to use the exhilaratingly creative minds we have been given to extend Jesus Gospel and Jesus works into the world that still doesn't get it.

It is then in the context of *doing ministry* that we see the shapes in the puzzle, and begin to discern the ways God chooses to speak us. This process of discernment will likely not be the same for each of us. The community stands together to hear the way God speaks to you, and to bring confirmation or a challenge, but hopefully, always to support you in becoming empowered to live out your life for his glory.

What Paul suggests in these verses is hard work. Because it is hard work, many of us want to camp out, not overnight, but permanently. We want to stay with what we know, with what has worked in our past, with what is comfortable. I understand that completely. What I also understand is that Jesus is loose in the world! He got out of that tomb and he's still loose, being

creative, leading people into new ministry, finding ways to reach new generations with the Good News. If we set our tent stakes in concrete, we won't be able to follow him - and we need to!

BACK TO MAIN SERMON PAGE

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